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ABSTRACT

The paper purports the need to restore the human environment by changing the present consumer-oriented value system toward a value system encompassing a global approach. Since human actions stem from cultural attitudes and values, before the human environment can be improved there must be basic change in the underlying cultural causes of the unsatisfactory conditions. Some of these cultural values include both Eastern and Western attitudes about family size, the concept of individual independence rather than interdependence, and the widespread faith that science and technology could find solutions to the problems of our deteriorating environment. There must be some fundamental changes in our way of living and in our values and beliefs in order to restore the human environment to a healthy and balanced condition. Our value system tends to equate social acceptance and status with the possession of goods. Many observers feel societies must provide other ways for people to gain status. The logical method for changing present cultural values is through our existing religious and educational institutions. The objectives of both should be developing within each person a sense of being a part of a world ecosystem. Since political parties reflect rather than lead public opinion, basic change must come from public understanding and acceptance of new rules and values necessary for the survival of the world. (Author/DE)

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ROLE OF VALUE SYSTEMS IN SHAPING THE HUMAN ENVIRONMENT

By

William B. Hemmer

THE ROLE OF VALUE SYSTEMS IN SHAPING THE HUMAN ENVIRONMENT

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Some time ago, in speaking about problems of the environment in our society, the comic strip character, Pogo, said, "We have met the enemy, and he is us.

Human actions, good or bad, stem from attitudes and values which reflect the cultural background of people. Thus, before the human environment can be improved, the underlying cultural causes of unsatisfactory conditions have to be examined and change must begin at this level. Otherwise, the efforts to improve the human environment will be superficial.

It is through its various cultures and subcultures that society has strived to satisfy the needs of its members, and in the process attitudes and values are shaped. As human beings found ways to satisfy their biological needs, they developed additional social needs and these, at times, have overshadowed their biological needs. Having satisfied their basic necessities, people began to acquire other things to make life easier and more comfortable. As luxuries became more common, they were valued as necessities. Today, things which a few generations ago were considered luxuries are now regarded as basic necessities. For example, when electric power is interrupted, many households are in trouble. The loss of power endangers both comforts and necessities.

As civilization developed, many values centered around the accumulation of material goods. This propensity to accumulate has greatly affected the human environment. Not only did human beings create most of their present surroundings, such as cities and industrial centers, but they also changed the natural environment through activities like farming and mining. The way in which they treated the natural environment was a reflection of the attitudes, values and beliefs they had toward it.

Humans have always had a dual relationship with their natural surroundings. In very ancient times people were awestruck by the power of nature and sometimes worshipped the forces of nature as gods. At the same time, however, humans struggled with nature to acquire food and shelter. As population grew, knowledge increased, and technology became more sophisticated. As this occurred, human reverence for nature declined and the exploitation of nature increased.

During the past few centuries, many species of animals could not survive in the changed environment created by man, or they were wantonly slaughtered as civilization advanced into new frontiers. Many people shrugged the slaughter off as an example of Darwin's theory of survival of the fittest which was eagerly accepted in the late nineteenth century and had considerable influence on thinking since then. Thus, the concept of nature as merely a source of goods rather than as an interdependent series of ecosystems has been ingrained in our culture.

Furthermore, nature has usually been regarded as limitless in her wealth and in her ability to absorb the abuses of man. A boundless optimism has existed, particularly in North America, that the bounty of nature could not be exhausted. The feeling was prevalent that if we used up what nature provided here, there would always be more over the crest of the next hill. Only in recent years have we begun to realize that resources are not limitless. While humans have been altering their natural surroundings to suit their needs, they have also been inventing and building artificial things which affect both nature and man directly.

Attitudes and values which have been held by substantial numbers of people over the years have done much to bring the world to its present precarious state. A discussion of a few of the attitudes and values that have tended to make human society particularly abrasive to the natural environment follows.

Attitude Toward Family Size

Attitudes and values about family size have influenced population growth. Until the 1900's, the biblical command of God to "Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it . . ." (Genesis 1:28) was generally accepted in most western cultures. In a similar way, other cultures had values inculcated over the ages that tended to promote population growth. In traditional Chinese culture, for example, a person without a son is as good as dead, for no one will exist to carry on his family name. In one of the traditional Indian cultures, a person without a son cannot be reincarnated after death. These beliefs are some of the most personal and cherished values that individuals have clung to since the beginning of time, and they are not quickly changed. The controversy over population growth strikes directly at these cultural values and beliefs.

Today, a growing number of people regard rapid expansion of population as the major cause of the deterioration of the quality of the human environment. They see a halt in population growth as a means of reversing undesirable trends and of solving many social and economic problems. On the other hand, some feel that our efforts should be spent in directly confronting our problems and seeking their solution rather than trying to limit population growth. Still others are opposed to population control because of strong economic or religious values.

Although ideas of family size have strong roots in religion and tradition, there were very practical reasons in the past for having larger rather than small families. In colonial North America large families were the rule. Ten children were common if the wife lived long enough. More hands to do the many tasks of frontier farming were valued to help everyone live better. However, by the turn of the 20th century the family in the United States was getting smaller. By the 1930's the rate of family growth reached a low point. Since many young men could not find jobs and, consequently, could not provide for a wife and

family, many marriages were postponed and procreation delayed. Also, attitudes toward birth control changed, with more people seeking knowledge of ways to limit family size.

But, there were still forces opposed to limiting family size. Birth control violated religious values of some groups. Secondly, motherhood was idolized and highly valued. Girls were trained in early childhood to believe that they should become mothers when they grew up. Both men and women were expected to marry in their early twenties, if not in the late teens. Jokes about spinsters and homosexuals reinforced the idea that somehow people who didn't marry in their early twenties or at an expected age were "different." The unmarried were also penalized by higher tax rates while the married were given exemptions for each child. Women's careers were regarded as transitory, existing before child-bearing and/or after their family had grown. Naturally, when couples married, they were expected to have children. If they did not, they were looked upon as impotent.

Thus, strong social attitudes and values in both eastern and western cultures tended to compel people to procreate whether they really wanted to or not. The result has been a rising population spiral that continues to restrict the living space of everyone and raises the specter of starvation on a world-wide scale.

Value of Independence

Along with the idea of survival of the fittest, the value of independence developed in early modern times. A competent person should be able to take care of themself, battling successfully against all hostilities. A good deal of the spirit of independence and individual action survives in our culture today. It encourages the feeling that we should make the most of the world now for ourselves and let others take care of themselves.

Our values which favor independence and freedom affect many activities that have a large impact on the human environment. Many consumer goods or services are bought to satisfy our desires. Unfortunately, these same goods are often produced and used, or the services provided, at great cost to the environment.

Once people have grown accustomed to the freedom and independence offered by the material goods that create pollution, noise or overcrowding of facilities, any effort to improve the quality of life will require some changes in values and life styles. Currently there is a slight trend toward reversing the status of the automobile as a symbol of independence. Individuals are now becoming more aware of what is happening to the environment as a result of the proliferation of automobiles and the high cost of energy. As people find streets and highways dangerously overcrowded, fuel scarce and expensive and service poor, they may see the car, not as a symbol of independence, but rather of dependence. Consequently, several of the main psychological motives for possessing an automobile may begin to disappear.

Attitudes Toward Science

The widespread faith that science and technology could find solutions to all our problems has received serious setbacks in recent years as the human environment has begun to deteriorate in certain areas. Today, many are realizing that science and the technology it spawns can be a two-edged sword. Some have attempted to combine scientific and technological theories with social philosophies so that people could understand better what was happening. The success of these attempts to join disciplines is important if we are going to continue to improve the human environment.

In an effort to combine the tenets and findings of science and social philosophies, Van Rensselaer Potter has suggested forming a new discipline,

"Bioethics." The major goal of bioethicss is to use the normally separate disciplines of science and humanities together as a guide for future actions. Defining wisdom as "The knowledge of how to use knowledge for the social good," Potter pleads for the use of science, especially the findings of biology, to give realistic foundations to social philosophies. Biology gives us insights into what animals, including humans, are really like physically while philosophy suggests what the ideal man and society should be like. Man is innately neither good nor bad; rather, he is made and judged good or bad by his culture and by his own values. Thus, any efforts to change human activities must have a basis in culture and be reflected in legal, economic, and scientific activity. All of the attitudes and values previously discussed would have to be considered and possibly altered if modern society is to avoid the fate of all previous civilizations: decline and fall.[8]

The ability to adapt and progress depends on long-range wisdom, which not only looks for solutions in the future, but also examines what happened in the past to avoid the pitfalls. This long-range focus demands that we do not trust any single discipline alone to provide guidance; but rather use all the disciplines at our disposal.

Future Cultural Change

The preparatory committee for the Stockholm Conference in 1972 sent out a call for "a major reorientation of man's values and redeployment of his energies and resources" along with hundreds of other recommendations for remedial measures.[16] Some observers say that we must have some fundamental changes in our way of living and in our values and beliefs in order to restore the human environment to a healthy and balanced condition. For example, if the world's population is to be stabilized by equalizing births and deaths, cultural values about the size of families must be changed. Other fundamental beliefs which

have perhaps been the basis of the economic and technological development of Western nations may have to be changed too. The prestige that accompanies the possession of material goods, for example, causes people to want many things that they do not really need. Our value system tends to equate social acceptance and status with the possession of goods. Some observers feel societies will have to provide other ways for people to gain status. To do this societies must establish among their members values which cause people to act in ways less destructive and abrasive to the human environment. Encouraging the buying of services like education and recreation which require minimum amounts of natural resources in place of the buying of material goods may be one way. In addition, the possession of material goods in excess of what one really needs might come to be regarded as bad taste and socially frowned upon.

But how can such a drastic and fundamental change in cultural values and expectations be made on a worldwide scale? The logical method would seem to be via our existing institutions.

Changing Values Through Religion

As one of the molders of human behavior, religious values have a direct influence on the attitudes of church members. Some churches may take a posture of leadership and attempt to mold environmental consciousness in their members. In the past, most churches have not been directly concerned about these issues. However, in many religions there is a renewal of interest in the contemporary world. Racial injustice, political inequality and other social injustices involving groups outside the membership of the church are now considered legitimate concerns of the organization, and now, for the first time, environmental problems are beginning to be included in the list of wider ranging concerns.

Religion also has many indirect influences on changing attitudes and values. Several religious bodies have been stressing the need for social consciousness.

This entails not only showing concern for how an individual's activities may affect others in a society; but also working with others to bring about beneficial changes in society. The emphasis on social action is exemplified in the act of religious worship. The religious service itself is a communal activity involving mutual participation on the part of all the individuals present. It is this type of involvement that will be needed to bring about beneficial progress. Not only will people have to consider society in general before committing major acts; but they will also have to work as a community to bring about effective change.

The religious process has two other vital indirect influences on environmental attitudes. First, religion is optimistic in nature. Although human society may be beset with adversities, it will eventually overcome them and survive. If we hope to bring about long-range progress, we have to have some faith that our efforts will not be in vain. There has to be an element of faith that we will succeed if we put forth the concentrated effort. Second, religion is a process of bringing order out of chaos. While some religious groups attempt to bring about this order by planning only for an afterlife and avoiding the chaos on earth, others are deeply involved in searching for rational and humanistic answers to today's problems in a deteriorating environment.

Changing Values Through Education

Education is a powerful means for changing the values of both young and old alike. In this sense, education has to include the total learning environment of the individual, both formal and informal. The objectives of education should include developing within each person a sense of being a part of a world ecosystem. Education should also equip citizens with the basic concepts and information they need to make the kind of decisions that will insure their survival and that of their grandchildren on this planet.

Informal education is far more comprehensive than formal education since it begins at an early age in the home and continues throughout life. The news media, entertainment, community group activities are also vehicles of informal education. Sustained and increasing efforts through these channels are necessary if long-term changes in values are to be made. These efforts should include formation of community action groups to bring pressures on governmental agencies. Change agents should also focus on changing attitudes by disseminating information through the various media, such as television, radio, magazines, and newspapers. Perhaps the most influential of these is television. Not only does it reach the most people, but the impact is more forceful than that of the other media.

Schools should do their share to inculcate a sense of community responsibility in the young to improve the human environment and to do their share to establish a partnership with nature. This effort should begin in the early grades and continue through the college level, not as a separate course, but as an affective theme running through the whole curriculum.

The Future

Many people who are concerned about the environment seem to be grasping for some new set of rules which will regulate the relationship of individuals to their environment. In the future, the personal right to a decent life in a comfortable environment may be at stake. For example, although the overpowering noise of aircraft, congested traffic, or machinery may not violate one's property rights, it certainly does infringe on one's personal rights. The problem now seems to be that much of the environment is not felt to be the responsibility of anyone in particular. Many individuals tend to treat common properties as if they belonged to no one. Smoke billows into everybody's air, chemicals and filth are poured into everybody's water, and garbage is strewn on the public land. Little remorse is felt by individuals contributing to the collective degradation of the living space of all.

Those concerned with the quality of the environment are now calling for new rules and social expectations for living in society. For example, George F. Keenan of the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton, New Jersey, has called for a movement in America to bring society into harmony with nature. Keenan feels this movement must come from outside the political system, from within the culture itself. The objective would be to bring society into harmony with its habitat, the result being far different from what we have today. Keenan feels the necessary changes "are revolutionary in the effects they are bound to have on the character of our society." He says that, "There will be things we have to submit to which we will not all like: changes we will have to accept that will interfere with cherished and valued habits; practices we will have to embrace which will seem to us as steps backward in what we have been taught to see as progress of civilization." He feels existing political parties reflect rather than lead public opinion, therefore we can't expect them to come up with either the ideas or the leadership to make the necessary transformation that our present predicament requires.[17]

Thus, we must concentrate on bringing about public understanding and acceptance of the new rules and the new values which are necessary for the survival of society. To the extent that public opinion accepts this need, the political parties both large and small will be prepared to back and adopt such changes as their own. In this manner, a peaceful, democratic change is possible. Yet its consequences may seem quite revolutionary compared to the old system which will be replaced. But the time left for such changes may now be measured in decades at most, not centuries or half centuries. The opportunity to live productive, healthy lives in harmony with natural surroundings is a pressing need which many feel must be fulfilled by society very soon.

Changing Perceptions

The new rules for living in a society which exists in harmony with its environment may be partly the result of new and changed values about the role of humanity in relation to the world. People in the future may see themselves as the product of the past actions of living creatures who came before them. Likewise, they may become aware that their actions affect not only contemporary living creatures, but future people and other future beings as well.

In the growing awareness of their role as a partner in nature, people may develop a new humility. The old idea that people are independent from their natural surroundings and that they can lead an existence apart from the limitations of the planet where they live must give way to the realization that they are bound by the same laws that govern the activity of all residents of the biosphere. Emphasis in learning may shift from the measurement of finite things to the study of the processes, the relationships and the interaction between the various creatures and dynamic processes existing in our universe.

As people come to a better understanding of their total environment and develop an appreciation for the interrelationships among all living creatures, they will be able to play their role more harmoniously. After the era of chaotic transition of today, let us hope that a total environmental concept on a global basis will eventually be established. This will involve a shift from unthinking individual action to responsible group action; from technological exploitation of nature to partnership with nature, from selfish nationalism to unselfish internationalism; and from alienated cultures and societies to a harmonious world society. Without these changes, humankind will not likely survive through the next century.

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